ARTICLE APPEARED ON PAGE E-7

WASHINGTON POST
30 November 1984

JACK ANDERSON

Upgrading Germ-Warfare Intelligence

There is a worrisome tendency in this country to bury our heads in the sand and pretend that no civilized nation would stockpile germ- and chemical-warfare weapons. But there is evidence that the Soviet Union is doing exactly that.

In 1980 I was condemned for reporting that the Soviets had shipped chemical weapons and technology to Iraq. The U.S. government subsequently confirmed that Iraq had used them in its war against Iran.

Now there are disturbing rumors that Soviet chemical weapons have been sent to Nicaragua.

That's because detection of chemical- and biological-weapons stockpiling is a frustrating, costly and time-consuming process, and this type of intelligence had always been a low priority for the Central Intelligence Agency.

It's the assignment of priorities—"Priority 1" being the most urgent—that determines how much spy satellite time and other intelligence-gathering assets will be devoted to a particular problem.

CIA Director William J. Casey dealt with the question of priorities in a secret report, "Implications of Soviet Use of Chemical and Toxin Weapons for U.S. Security Interests," sent to President Reagan. It was prepared by the CIA and eight other federal intelligence agencies, and was reviewed by my associate Dale Van Atta.

"Historically," the report points out, "both collection and analysis of intelligence on chemical and biological warfare have suffered from persistently low priorities. Not until after the 1973 Yom Kippur War did the issue receive some recognition." That was when the Israelis gave CIA analysts tons of Soviet chemical and biological equipment captured from the Egyptians.

Priorities for gathering intelligence on various countries are assigned by the National Security Council. After the 1973 eye-opener, chemical and biological weapons (CBW) development in the Soviet Union was raised to "Priority 3" in 1975, and to "Priority 2" in 1977. In 1981, after President Reagan took office, CBW intelligence on the Soviets was given an unprecedented "Priority 1."

The difficulties of detecting chemical-biological weapons are enormous. The CIA report states: "Unlike most other systems, chemical and toxin munitions can be deployed and perhaps even employed without our being able to assess their characteristics . . . . A gas is usually invisible and usually leaves no discernible trace."

Gathering raw data is not the only problem. "On the analytic side, the intelligence effort still suffers from many years of neglect," the report says.

Officials at the policy-making level didn't learn of Soviet biological-weapons facilities until long after a suspicious anthrax epidemic broke out in 1979 near a suspected plant at Sverdlovsk.

The recent report to the president indicates that the bureaucratic situation has improved.

But the report concludes with a grave warning. Despite the steps that have been taken recently to improve intelligence gathering on Soviet chemical and biological weapons, the report says: "There should be no illusion about the feasibility of achieving a highly reliable verification scheme for a chemical weapons ban. Substantial uncertainties will still remain."